

KANEM-BORNU: THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND 15

Finally in the late fourteenth century, a rebellious Bulala group east of Lake Chad upset the Magumi Sefuwa rulers of Kanem, who ultimately came to the south-west portion of the Chad basin to establish what later became the empire of Bornu.

The collapse of the great Kanem empire in the fourteenth century is attributed by tradition to internal civil wars resulting from the Bulala revolt against the Sefuwa dynasty. The ultimate cause is rationalized in legend by an alleged irreligious act of the seventeenth king or Mai of Kanem, one Dunama, (ca. 1220-1260 A.D.) who is supposed to have "laid the foundations for the ensuing disaster of the empire by opening the sacred talisman of Bornu" which subsequently provoked men of ambition to entreat against the state.⁹ It may or may not be true, but it is very likely not the entire explanation even if we were to know what the "sacred talisman" was—which we do not; knowledge of its meaning and content have long since disappeared. Other reasons for the collapse of the kingdom besides that of a civil war against the Bulala can be suggested. The kingdom was in all likelihood not highly centralized and the nobles could quite easily unite, obtain outside help, and try to gain control. Indeed all of the traditions of the Bulala tell of them obtaining help from the Tubu of the central Sahara (a rebellious group who were tributary to Kanem) against the ruling Kanem dynasty.

Another factor is the nature of succession to the throne. Throughout the Sudan, and for as long as any traditions go back in Bornu, succession to the throne has always been open to those whose fathers have been monarchs. However, given many short reigns, this custom increases the number of contenders enormously and therefore exacerbates competition for royal office in the state so that the danger of civil wars and lack of unity is accelerated; the state is then much weakened as an effective political force. In other words, given a few short reigns, the possibility that more will follow becomes even greater unless a strong man with very strong backing emerges to quell the factions supporting various royal contenders. Finally it should be realized that Bornu was a much greener land than Kanem and it might have actually attracted the Kanem ruling group and their followers away from the drier, more inhospitable northern shores of Lake Chad. Certainly the kingdom of Kanem was not of such a nature that it suddenly collapsed when people (later to be called Kanuri) left. The Bulala clan assumed the leadership and Kanem continued as a sovereign state while the Kanuri tried, unsuccessfully at first, to reconquer their lost empire.

By the end of the fifteenth century the Sefuwa and their clan, the Magumi, had obtained sovereignty to the southwest of Lake Chad, and under a series of able monarchs they established their new kingdom of Bornu as a great power in the Sudan. The first of these rulers to organize and establish a really powerful state was a man named Ali Ghajedeni (ca. 1470-1500 A.D.), the forty-eighth monarch on the Sefuwa dynastic list. He built a new capital called Birni Ngazargamo, "the walled fortress," at the north end of Bornu and united this new kingdom under his control. Ali is supposed to have reconquered Kanem and re-established control over the Saharan trade while making war continually against Songhai to the west over the subjugation of the Hausa states and the east-west trade routes across the Sudan. His reign was followed by a series of others no less nota-

⁹ H. Barth, *Travels and Discoveries in North and Central Africa*, Vol. II, (London: Longmans, Green & Co., Ltd., 1857), p. 637.

KANEM-BORNU: SOCIAL AND POLITICAL BACKGROUND 19

mans and ruled it after World War I as a League of Nations Trust Territory, (later a U.N. Trust Territory) which meant in practice that it was part of the administrative responsibility of the colonial officials in Northern Nigeria. To appreciate more clearly what changes were brought about by colonialism, however, it is necessary to understand something of the social, economic, and in particular the political structure of Bornu, as it developed during pre-colonial times, and it is to this task that the remainder of the chapter is devoted.

Kanem-Bornu: The Social and Political Background

Only the sketchiest oddments of information are available about the nature of Kanem society. One Arabic record speaks of its capital as a city of tents, and traditions tell of a "Council of Nobles" that had a great deal of power over decision-making by the king, or Mai as he was called. From this and a few other data, such as the emphasis placed on the clan membership of persons mentioned in the early periods of the dynastic lists, we can attempt a reconstruction that fits the facts. The early kingdom seems to have been made up of patrilineal, named clans under senior or noble lineages (also named) whose heads formed the so-called "Council of Nobles" under the king or Mai. The Mai himself was head of the senior lineage of a senior clan considered to be the most important or powerful in the region. In all probability the term "Mai" or "king" was used for all leaders of clans just as it is today among some of the nomadic and semi-nomadic peoples of the Sahara to the north of Lake Chad who are closely related to the Kanuri. It also appears that the great Kanuri king lists are just what local people say they are—lists of the leaders of the Magumi Sefuwa or Sefuwa lineage heads of the Magumi clan. People in the clan considered themselves related by ties of descent to a common ancestor; but they could not describe the exact link with him, while they could describe the genealogical ties through men that made them all Sefuwa. Very probably these people utilized both cattle and domesticated plants although their early city of tents, referred to by Arabic historians, also suggests a greater emphasis on nomadism and the use of cattle. This is consistent with the clan organization described above; indeed this form of organization is widespread among nomadic and semi-nomadic peoples in the Sahara, North Africa, the Horn of Africa, and Arabia. Later, as attested by the ruins at Garamoulé northwest of Lake Chad they probably built more permanent settlements and very likely used slaves from the south of Lake Chad as trade goods and as agricultural laborers.

How centralized and developed the early stages of the Kanem state really were is an intriguing and difficult question and one that can be solved only by extensive historical and archaeological research. Certainly concepts of statecraft from Islamic areas to the north of the desert and trips by Kanem monarchs to Mecca would have acquainted the rulers with the ideas of very highly centralized states. How much this actually affected Bornu is unknown, although it is possible that tensions over the power of the central monarch were another reason for the civil strife which led eventually to the migration of the Sefuwa from Kanem to Bornu.

After the Sefuwa set up their kingdom in Bornu the state became a much more highly organized and centrally controlled political system. The people who

THE NINETEENTH CENTURY KINGDOM 27

lord living in the capital would have appointed several representatives to this particular fief because it had grown so big. Such fiefs were the ones most likely to fall prey to sub-division at the death of a king and appointment of a new one. For at this time the incoming monarch had to reward his chief supporters with grants of new fiefs.

As in the pre-nineteenth century the political hierarchy served as an appeal court system, and at the very top of the local fief hierarchy the junior lords shared adjudication with the most senior local leader whatever his rank. Usually these very senior political leaders of the fief had koranic scholars, or mallams, who gave legal advice. Serious cases such as homicide were referred immediately to the capital.

The other variety of fief, that based on birth into a particular group, or *jili* is less well understood. The word "*jili*" refers to variety or kind. The people speak of this or that *jili* of soil, or tree, or person. In using it to refer to a person they give his territorial or settlement background, or ethnic group, or his clan grouping if this differs from his territorial classification. Thus a person can have several *jili*—ethnic, territorial, or clan. Even patrilineal lineage affiliation can be described under this term. Nomadic groups in Bornu were represented as *jili* in the Shehu's court by a big lord of the *jili* (*chima kura jilibé*): this man was, in effect, the fief-holder responsible for the nomad group. Sometimes he was a leader of the group itself, and at other times he was a trusted Kanuri follower of the monarch. In both cases the big lord of the *jili* administered the group through his own representative in the group who was, unlike the territorial grouping, the local leader of a nomad clan, or a sub-tribe. Sometimes entire tribal groupings came under one jurisdiction, and at other times or in other sections of the state the tribe would be broken down, into subsections based on clan groupings with one or more clans under a single fief-holder or big lord of the *jili*.

This double fief system allowed the nineteenth-century Bornu government the organizational means of administering both the settled and nomadic populations of Bornu. It also did something else very important, for it allowed the government effective control over the population even when natural disasters such as outbreaks of disease or sudden invasions sent the people into flight. If a large set of settlements had grown up in one territory from an original one, and this area was then beset by some disaster, which made the people flee in several directions, they were still thought of as a *jili* or a single variety of persons. They were still organized under their old lords, and their old leaders still retained over them some powers of taxation and demands of loyalty. If the entire kingdom was in an uproar—as it was during the Fulani wars at the beginning of the century with people fleeing in all directions—then old leaders, or former leaders, could muster their scattered followers as *jili*, and the political integration of the kingdom remained intact and viable until new settlements stabilized locally, and the territorial-based fief system could re-assert itself.

Complicating the system was the settlement of groups with fiefs through permission granted by the big lord in the capital. He could be approached by the leaders of a group of craftsmen, or kinsmen, or people of the same ethnic extraction, who requested of him that they be allowed to settle in one of his fiefs. In this case, the special group was directly under the jurisdiction of the lord through his local administrator, the junior lord, who dealt with their headman. In later generations,

174
173
563

at different times, or may have become assimilated to Kanuri culture. A shatter-belt of small tribes, part-pagan and part-Moslem, and strongly influenced by Kanuri culture, rings Bornu Emirate. (These have been described in Chapter 1.) North of Bornu are the Kanembu, closely related culturally and linguistically to the Kanuri, and with an inter-twined history that goes back to the Empire of Kanem, which preceded the Empire of Bornu.

- [614] The Kanembu and the Kanuri share another set of jilis--which appear to be the remnants of patrilineal kin groups, or patrisibs.

173
614

The word jili will here be used in a very restricted sense to refer to the sib. Informants with an interest in the history of Bornu and with a strong historic sense relate that the jilis were no longer functioning in the days when Shehu Laminu ruled at Kukawa. Kanuri, Kanembu and all the sub-groups of Kanuri (Kwoyam, Mobber, Manga etc.) were sub-divided into jilis with [304] the same names cross-cutting them. A child was of the same jili as his father, and each jili had its distinctive facial scars by which its members could immediately be identified. The jili was not endogamous. Each jili had its common ancestor, whose name is known for every jili; each jili had as its head [65] someone appointed by the Mai, or king. The primary function of the jili head was to collect taxes (hara^{ji}) from the people of [643] his jili. The Mails of old were of the jili Magumi, the royal [613] sib, and of the sub-jili Sef. All individuals of the sub-jili Sef are descended from Sef Isaki who is reputed to have come

173 from Yemen, consequently the dynasty of the Mals of Bornu is re-
 • 614 ferred to as the Sef dynasty. There are twelve such sub-jills
 613 within the jill Magumi. If within the sub-jill Sef a man should
 arise to great power and importance, his future descendants
 would refer to him as the ancestor of their sub-sub-jill (line-
 age) of the sub-jill Sef. One informant, who is Kanembu (but
 culturally Kanuri), gave the following pedigree: Kanembu, jill
 Kuvuri, sub-jill Kongana, sub-sub-jill Malam Shia. Malam Shia
 was an important historic personage who is considered to be the
 founder of the lineage which bears his name.

173
 643
 614

[17]

The Sef dynasty came to an end after the Fulani invasions,
 and Shehu Laminu established the line of the present Shehus
 though he himself never ruled as king. Shehu Laminu was Kan-
 embu, of the jill Kuvuri. He was followed into Bornu by a num-
 ber of Kanembu and Shuwa nobles, with their retinue, who assisted
 him in driving back the Fulani. Shehu Laminu was instrumental
 in further reducing the role of the jills by appointing a Shetima
Kanuribe (Shetima is a noble title) as head of all the Kanuri,
 replacing the various heads of the jills; he did the same for
 the Shuwas under him.

614
 178

[64]

Today everyone knows his own jill, and the jill of his par-
 ents, which may and usually does differ, but the jill no longer
 performs any social function. Few people can give their sub-jill.
 Many of the jills today have a nominal head. The present Shehu
 is obviously head of all the Kanembu Kuvuri. The head of the
 Kanuri Magumi is the former Waziri Ibrahim. The Shetima Kanuribe

- 614 is Shetima Mastafa, the Ajia of Kukawa. The head of the Kanem-
 178 bu Temagari, is Alhaji Mai Manga of N'Guigmi, in Niger, not in
 [64] Nigeria. When Alhaji Mai Manga was appointed chief of his re-
 [64] gion by the French authorities the Shehu of Bornu, in British
 Nigeria, sent him a gown (kulugu) as his mark of office. It
 was necessary for him to obtain the traditional approval of the
 [64] Shehu before he could be accepted by the populace. The heads
 of Shuwa and Fulani jilis are given kulugus by the Shehu, which
 indicates the political nature of the jili, or sib. However,
 the heads of the Kanuri jilis today have no functions whatso-
 ever. People come to pay them respect (noona) as a result of
 their position, but this is all that remains attached to the po-
 sition.

F. The System of Social Stratification.

- 175 The old Kanuri system of social stratification recognized
 565 four distinct social classes. These were royalty (ngalwo),
 aristocracy (kantuoma), commoners (talaka), and slaves (kalya).
 One can distinguish four separate variables, which, when taken
 together, determine the social importance of any category of
 individuals. These are: power, wealth, respect, and free-
 birth; among the Kanuri they can serve as criteria for determin-
 ing the rank of a social class, or of a single individual with-
 in a class.

- 121 Power is a quality which can be used to define a social
 61 relationship, and which derives from the political structure
 66
 565

605 play with his patrilineal cousins. As in the matrilineal case, if ego changes his joking-wife, the tin joking relationships shift also in association with the change. That is to say, these joking relationships may change in their personnel from time to time, but are ordered in relation to the adult marriage rules in each separate situation.

[184] Although no attempt was made to measure class differences in the cousin joking relationships, it should be noted here that several informants claimed that the above joking relations were "unbecoming" for good proper behaviour and they did not practise such customs.

567 Outside the kinship system a joking relationship may hold between a master and his slave, although this is usual only when the slave is an entertainer of some kind. Informants denied that it occurred when the slave is merely serving his master in an ordinary work situation. Amongst the various occupations, joking relations obtain between smiths and butchers; barber-doctors and smiths; mallams (koranic teacher-priests) and hunters; kola-nut wholesalers and retailers; dyers and tailors; a builder of mud houses and his labourers; a fire-wood seller and his customers; pepper sellers and kola-nut wholesalers. Joking relations also hold between clans such as Ngala'a and Magumi; Nguma and Tara; Kuburi and Tara; Su'urti and Kuburi; or between ethnic groups like Shuwa and Kanuri; Kurdi and Shuwa; Hausa and Fulani; Kanuri and Fulani; Tubu and Monga; Monga and Bédde; Kanembu and Wasili (Arabs).

571
602 In the above relationships which seem in all cases to cover an area of interrelations involving potential conflicts, the

557
511

range of personal ambition, inertia, and variation in the scale of social relations. The kinds of structures which result from the natural processes of birth, maturation, marriage and death may vary and, as we have seen, result in various kinds of stresses to be incorporated into the organization. However, these can almost always be mitigated when the structure has a satisfactory operating distribution of power and authority. If not, then fissionable forces in residence structures tend to emerge and themselves determine the character of the group.

Maximal Lineages and Clans

• 6/4

It is not necessary within the scope of the present discussion to go into a full description. Nevertheless, it should be noted that traditionally Kanuri kinship included functional clans and to some extent at least, i.e. among the upper classes, maximal patri-lineages. In Chapter II, mention was made of the military use of clans in the army in the pre-1893 periods of Bornu history. All Kanuri if pressed are able to give their clan membership whose identity they generally recognise patrilineally. Exceptions were found, however, where informants gave two clans which they identified as coming to them from their mother and their father. Nevertheless, basing judgment upon the statements of older informants it seems fairly certain that clan membership was reckoned patrilineally.

The Magumi and Kuturi clans are recognised by some to be the clans of the leading lineages of the Kanuri and Kamsay peoples respectively. It is also generally known in a rather vague way, which varies from informant to informant, that all clan members are descended from a common ancestor about whom there is sometimes an

• 614 origin story, often associating the founder with the Prophet. For example, the following story was related by an informant about the origins of the thra clan:

One day a barber was shaving the Prophet's head. The man made a mistake and cut the Prophet's scalp. Blood came out and the barber drank it. Everyone who comes from that barber is thra. They are not connected with chiefs, they are common people but they are close to the Prophet -- they are sherib, fire will not burn them.

Some informants felt that in the old days there may have been a tendency for clan endogamy, not as a sanctioned custom, but as a matter of mere frequency. No one ever heard of any exogamous rules, or ever connected the clans to any natural species of flora and fauna.

613
614
565 Among some of the high status groups and some of the very high status families of Bornu, not only clan membership is known but also a series of maximal lineages within the clan to which the name of an original founder (not mythical as in the case of the clan) is attached. Most Kanuri have heard of the Sefuwa lineage of the Magumi clan. This was the royal lineage of pre-nineteenth century Bornu. No rules of marriage were elicited for this grouping.

614
829 Questions about clan to younger Kanuri and even older ones in some cases often brought out (after tribal affiliation) residential associations. Thus, a peasant informant would relate how his daughter had been married to a man whose clan was Kanuri. Continued questioning on the same point would bring out the reply that the son-in-law's sub-clan was Maiduguri; in other words, the name of his town.

613
614
121 On the basis of this data, it is concluded that Kanuri clans and maximal lineages have very little, if any, functioning significance in the contemporary society.

- 6/4 significance in the contemporary society. It should be noted that for
121 purposes of the present study, the term "clan" refers to extra-lineage
connections between persons with some understanding of common ancestry
from an original mythical founder. As Africanists have used this term,
clan does not necessarily refer to exogamous groups.